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ABSTRACT

The humanities professors of Northern Kentucky University conducted a series of four forums to bring together representative senior citizens, community leaders, political leaders, and educators of the Northern Kentucky area for a series of discussions focusing on the question of whether public agencies fairly serve senior citizens or merely offer them charity condescendingly disguised as services. At the same time, the project tested the thesis that senior citizens do not wish to be mere recipients of special programs, but to be participants in and contributors to programs that shape and design the later years of their lives. The forums were found to be successful in forming a relationship between the professors and the senior citizens, and in gathering input from the seniors. The senior citizens seemed pleased to be asked to participate, and expressed their opinions and needs freely. In turn, the local politicians and social service agencies provided thoughtful information and sincere interest, although they cautioned that senior citizens were just one of their many concerns and that they could not find immediate solutions to the seniors' problems. They encouraged the senior citizens to organize for more effective representation and problem solving. Overall, the project appeared to have been successful in bringing the groups together, although better publicity efforts are needed to increase attendance at such meetings. It also became clear through the project that the public as a whole needs to be informed about the problems of senior citizens. Finally, the concept of using humanities professors was found to be a good one, with the professors able to participate as learners and not just experts. It was recommended that the University's involvement with senior citizens be continued and expanded. (KC)

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PROJECT EVALUATION

Open Forum for Senior Citizens

of the

Northern Kentucky Area

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PROJECT EVALUATION

A. PROJECT GOALS

The Social Science Department (humanities professors) had two basic goals. One was to bring together representative senior citizens, community leaders, political leaders, and educators of the Northern Kentucky area for a series of frank and candid sessions, focusing on the question of whether public agencies, do, in fact, fairly serve senior citizens or merely offer them charity condescendingly disguised as services. The other goal was to test the thesis that senior citizens do not wish to be mere recipients of special programs, but to be participants in and contributors to programs that shape and design the late years of their lives.

B. RELATION TO THE THEME

Each session was structured around the Kentucky Humanities Council (KHC) theme, "Our Public Agencies: Servants or Masters?" In the series of meetings, the senior citizens themselves confronted, each time, the basic questions which were the central and tangential themes of the KHC - Are senior citizens served by the public agencies that profess concern for them, or are they merely pawns of bureaucratic manipulations? What are the hopes and aspirations, the concerns and fears of senior citizens of an urban area, and are the agencies to which senior citizens turn for help truly sensitive to such hopes, fears, and desires?

C. NARRATIVE

There were four sessions in the Open Forum for Senior Citizens of the Northern Kentucky Area.

The first session was held on the main campus of Northern Kentucky University. This session involved the seven humanities professors, the active seminar participants (as opposed to the advisory committee), and senior citizens, elected representatives from various senior citizen housing units and the myriad communities that comprise the Northern Kentucky area. The senior citizens were transported to the University by the humanities professors, each professor having designated several of the senior citizens as the sub-group with which he work.

The first session, all realized, would be the key to the whole project. If it went well, then the program would go well. There was, thus, no little fear and trembling among the professors. It is one thing to write a project proposal, pen in hand, dictionary and thesaurus close by, noble thoughts and standard clichés tripping through the mind, and quite another to translate the proposal into meaningful, working sessions. It is strange how the gods of little things always seem to plague first undertakings. One always seems to forget name tags; each person thinks that one of the others is responsible for the coffee and refreshments; "they" were supposed to have the rooms reserved for the forum, but "they" also scheduled the high school speech contest in the same rooms, at the same time, at the same hour. It's at this point that one feels a great kinship with Mark Twain, who said that his great strength in learning to be a river boat pilot was his great ignorance of all that he would have to learn and of all the mistakes he would make in the process. Similarly,

the professor's ignorance of all the hidden sandbars and cross-currents of overlooked details and misunderstood directions allowed them to overcome them as each arose in turn.

Most of the tension, however, arose from the questions of how the senior citizens would react to the idea of the forum. Would they, for some strange reason, be "awed" by the professors? Would they ask questions, talk candidly about the problems, channel their views and concerns along the lines of the overall theme? What if, in the first ten minutes or so they decided the whole thing was a waste of time? What, then, would be done with the next two hours, to say nothing of the following sessions? What happened was that none - not one - of the worst fears materialized. The senior citizens were magnificent. From the first, they were friendly, interested, concerned, quite aware of the problems that they faced, not adamant about the fact they they had no desire to be mere recipients of special programs designed by a society that enclosed them in categories (the "golden years", for example, to cite just one nauseous, euphemistic, categorizing term). In short, each senior citizen (another rather offensive term) was very much his or her own person.

The format for the first session was general and flexible, the structure evolving the natural flow of events, rather than being imposed on the events. First, there was an introduction by each person, complete with capsule information about each person's interests. Next, the project director outlined the general ideas behind the forum, explaining the program in relation to the KHC theme, and additionally, explaining that frank and open on any and all ideas would not only be in order, but very much desired.

The meeting was then open for questions, and the questions flowed. From the beginning, the senior citizens were active and vocal participants, quickly dissipating any lingering fears on the part of the humanities professors that the theme of the session would be sounds of silence.

The session then broke for rest, relaxation, and refreshments.

The second part of the first session opened with the humanities professors exercising a double role. Each explained his particular field, his interest in extending some of the ideas of the discipline beyond the traditional fold - the University - into the broader realm of urban life and urban problems. Each emphasized his approach, which was basically, one foot in his particular speciality and one foot in the turbulent, trying, changing, and challenging problems of modernity. (Another variation on the KHC theme, in short). Each professor then acted as a recording secretary for a smaller group of senior citizens, as the large group broke down in groups of three or four and tried to list the most pressing problems and issues concerning society generally and public agencies particularly, in relation to the lives of society's "seniors".

These sessions focused in on the issues of day-to-day life, the particular and peculiar problems of housing, transportation, medicine, education, social security, security on the streets and in the homes, food, and prices. Out of these issues evolved a list of questions, a list that, later, would serve as the theme of the seminars with politicians and heads of the area social agencies. Once a more or less agreed-on set of priorities for problems, issues, and questions was arrived at, the small groups merged into the larger group for a "last things" session, a sort of life, liberty and pursuit of the good life seminar. The consensus of opinion among the humanities professors and the senior citizens was that

there could, indeed, be a reciprocity of help with problems, of understanding, of "education" in the best and broadest meaning of that word, between an urban college (a public agency, too) and the older members of an urban society. That the senior citizens left the session liking and trusting the "young" humanities professors was by far the major outcome of the first session.

The second session of the forum was held at the Chase Law School division of the University. Invited to this session (in addition to the senior citizens and the humanities professors, the consultants) were community leaders, local mayors, state and national legislators. The list of those invited was long. The list of those who attended was much shorter. Fortunately, those who did attend represented a cross-section of local, state and national legislators, or their field representatives. (The cast of characters for this and other sessions appears as enclosed material in this report). This session, though generally reported on favorably by the senior citizens, lacked the warmth and unity of the first session. Perhaps, in large measure, this was due to the physical surroundings. Not knowing how many of those invited (the long list) would actually attend, but preparing for eventuality of a large gathering, the large, main room at Chase became the session's working quarters. As mentioned, the gathering was small. Somehow, a few people in a large room creates the effect of a small band of pilgrims huddling together in a vast, slightly menacing open plain. Then, too, the acoustics of the room were not those to lift the heart of the avid first-nighter. Yet, in spite of these shortcomings, the session went well. The legislators, the field of representatives, and the mayor were men of good will. The senior citizens were, by this session, at ease with the idea of the forum.

The political figures formed a panel, each member introducing himself and giving a short resumé of his work on behalf of senior citizens and his plans for future action. A number of senior citizens asked frank questions which revealed a concern for basic problems of transportation, medicare and social security benefits, meals for the house-bound.

While the politicians were openly and sincerely sympathetic, they lacked concrete proposals for change. That there do not appear clear answers to the function and mandate of the various social agencies in the area is a problem which afflicts us all. One generally agreed upon belief was that senior citizens must effectively organize for political lobbying if they are to make their wishes felt. The senior citizens appeared to concur, feeling that unless they were able to exert continual pressure, their needs would be forgotten on the day after the elections.

In general the politicians pointed out, not as a means of rationalizing, but as a statement on the realities of life, that the problems of aging are only one of the many areas in which they are engaged, and that members of the state legislature work under the disadvantage of the biennial system which hinders continuity of efforts. All of the politicians and their field representatives were open to personal contact on specific issues, leaving their telephone numbers and addresses with the senior citizens' representatives. The Mayor of Fort Thomas was enthusiastic about cooperating with other officials in the Northern Kentucky Area to extend facilities for senior citizens; it is unfortunate that the mayors of other cities did not attend as some useful working relationship between them might have emerged from the meeting.

The session did not break up into smaller groups on this occasion as general discussion took up the available time. At a meeting of the humanities professors held after, it was agreed that while those in public office are sympathetic to senior citizens, our political structure has become so complex, even cumbersome, that it is increasingly difficult to bring it to bear on such relatively simple problems as getting hot meals to the incapacitated - in short, the age-old problem of red tape continues to stalk the world like a dim shade.

The third forum was held on the Highland Heights Campus of Northern Kentucky University. Present were the senior citizens' representatives, the humanities professors, and heads of social agencies[1] (see Appended list of names and titles: Section D). The format followed that of the first meeting: introduction of the speakers, followed by comments from each, a break for refreshments, and the smaller group sessions.

This was perhaps, though third in sequence, the central, pivotal session, since the social agencies represented touch more directly on the lives of the senior citizens than any other of society's institutions. It quickly became clear that the heads of social agencies are themselves faced with problems - particularly lack of funds and sometimes lack of clear guidelines and cohesive planning on the part of those above them. There is a basic insecurity, too, evolving perhaps out of the fact that social agencies are but reflections of society's commitments to problems, and social commitments can often be whimsical and capricious. In this session, once the initial reticence and uncertainty that accompanies large groups was overcome, the questions and exchanges of views flowed. The meeting overran time barriers by mutual consent of all participants.

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[1]Dr. Richard Ward also attended in his capacity as advisor to the project.

The meeting served to endorse the conclusion reached earlier in the project by the humanities professors that there is a desperate need for information on what agencies have been set up to serve senior citizens, where their offices are located and what, in plain man's language, are their functions and real abilities to meet specific needs. The social agencies are both eager to disseminate this information and frustrated about how to make their individual services common knowledge in a sprawling urban area that is comprised of so many small towns.

As in each of the previous meetings, the senior citizens were transported to and from the university by the humanities professors.

The fourth and final forum was held on the following day. Present were the humanities professors and their advisors (see Appended list: Section D). The history of the previous forums was discussed and the need for further work agreed upon. The fact that the senior citizens have come to see the humanities professors as friends and allies who have the power and influence to make changes carries a deep obligation to continue our efforts. Specifically, it was the general concensus that the most logical next step in the work is for the gathering and assembling of as much information on the services that is possible. Further, it is obviously the task of the university community generally to continue the lines of warmth and goodwill with the Northern Kentucky Area senior citizens, and to continue the good first steps in involving the university in the problems and hopes and fears and aspirations of the people of the whole urban area.

More concretely, an evaluation form, later sent to senior citizens along with a letter asking them for one more ounce of patience in helping us to complete the project, was drafted by the advisors. The replies

received reveal enthusiasm for the goals of the forum and an eagerness to continue working with the humanities professors. Two of us contacted the senior citizens to ensure that they had received the evaluation form and were familiar with the situation of the project at present. And so, it would seem, the forum was not just a project complete in itself, but a catalyst for an ever increasing involvement of the university, particularly the humanities departments, in the larger community which houses it.

D. RESOURCE PEOPLE

HUMANITIES PROFESSORS

Harold Lew Wallace, Project Director, Chairman, Department of History, Northern Kentucky University.

Michael Adams, Associate Professor, Department of History, Northern Kentucky University.

Lawrence Borne, Associate Professor, Department of History, Northern Kentucky University.

David Payne, Associate Professor, Department of History, Northern Kentucky University.

Gerald Richards, Associate Professor, Department of History, Northern Kentucky University.

Edwin Weiss, Associate Professor, Department of Geogr.phy, Northern Kentucky University.

Jeffrey Williams, Associate PRofessor, Department of History, Northern Kentucky University.

E. USE OF THE HUMANITIES

1. It is difficult to estimate the value of a humanities background in a project of this nature. On the one hand, this was a new field for all of us, and we have not as yet developed a specialist's knowledge of the history of aging. For example, we have not as yet collected a body of information on how elder citizens are treated, or have been treated, in other societies. There is a problem, too, in knowing what a member of the humanities should be able to contribute. For instance, how is a philosopher to appeal to current problems of aging by disgressing on the philosophy of previous societies? This question, for example, poses as many additional questions as answers. Yet, to ask the hard questions is perhaps more valuable than providing cheap, cliché answers.

On the other hand, the benefits of a background in the humanities may be of a less tangible nature. The lack of professional jargon within the disciplines of the participating professors encouraged the freedom of discussion which was one of the most valuable outcomes of the sessions.

2. In the best sense of the term, the forum was a "humanities project". Perhaps specific disciplines did not matter as much to the participants particularly senior citizens, as the fact that we were persons working at an institution in the area who respected senior citizens. The humanist, in the broadest and most meaningful use of the term, is someone who is aware of the sad undertomes of Malbraus's expression, "the human condition", and who struggles to give meaning and dignity to "man's fate". The forums, then, were comprised of humanists.

The problems faced by senior citizens would seem to require not so much professional skills as a certain common sense, compassion and power to implement solutions to glaring problems.

F. PUBLICITY

Press releases on the forums were prepared by the humanities professors in conjunction with the Public Relations Department of the University. These were given to local papers, including the Cincinnati and Falmouth areas. The space given to the releases was disappointing and despite the fact that reporters attended the forum, no articles ensued. The apparent fact that the problems faced by the senior citizens are not "newsworthy" is a significant comment on the priorities established by the community and the media.

The University newspaper, The Northerner, carried interviews with the humanities professors. Xerox copies of all the articles which appeared are appended to this report.

G. AUDIENCE

1. The average attendance per meeting was twenty-six people, excluding the humanities professors present at each session. No students attended, possibly because an article on the project, scheduled for the University newspaper, was late in appearin However, the students who knew of the plans of the university to continue senior citizen projects are quite enthusiastic about the idea. The bulk of the participants (excluding politicians and heads of social agencies invited to attend specific forums) were representatives from senior citizen groups within the area, including Grand Towers (Newport), Golden Towers (Covington), Hathaway Court (Covington), Lakeside Terrace (Highland Heights), the Dayton Community Action Center, which is staffed partially by senior citizens, and the Black Community of Covington.

An obvious difficulty was encountered in trying to reach citizens outside of living complexes. Newspaper coverage seemed to fail here. Success

in reaching citizens with Dayton and the Black Community was attained partially with the help of student contacts (a very encouraging side effect of the forum - this enthusiastic help by students).

Any attempt to bring, say, senior citizens at large onto campus would have to be preceded by much more intensive advertising. Inexperience in dealing with the public may explain the disappointing results of our attempts at press coverage. (On the other hand, newspapers are so often accessories after the fact, so perhaps it was not just inexperience that brought the disappointing publicity).

2. No admission fee was charged.

3. The audience was composed almost exclusively of senior citizens. It was found that despite advertising, there was little interest in attending the forums by the community at large, save for those who were specifically invited. This may be symptomatic of attitudes to senior citizens within the community. However, the high rate of attendance as shown by those personally invited to attend seems to show public and private groups will respond when the personal contact comes (a lesson is thereby noted).

4. Eliciting discussion from the audience was not a problem. The forums gave the senior citizens an opportunity, which they felt had been lacking previously, to air their grievances and obtain information on specific issues. Two factors perhaps helped to produce an atmosphere conducive to discussion: a. the mutual trust and respect established between the professors and the senior citizens (The lack of a constricting professional jargon may have helped here); b. the format of the meetings (to reiterate - after the panel discussion at each meeting, the participants broke up into small groups, each one containing one or more of the humanities professors). An excellent rule of thumb for any "expert" conducting a forum might be -

"Don't be an expert". Let those whose problems are central issues talk. In time, under the subtle influence of listening, an "expert" might even become one.

One problem, however, is clear: It is easy enough to define areas in which senior citizens feel that they lack sufficient information, input, and consideration (for example, medical aid, planning of housing information on and availability of hot meals, transportation), but it is more difficult to obtain and disseminate information, determine methods of gaining in-put into planning for senior citizens, and to gain consideration of their needs on the part of the community as a whole. In other words, while we are now aware of what many of the problems are, a more extended project is required if we are to begin finding solutions to them.

Politicians and heads of social agencies who took part in the forums seemed most willing to listen to problems, to contribute information and advice.

H. COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A number of organizations, such as the City Council of Fort Thomas and the Women's Society of Florence, have declared an interest in cooperating on any further project undertaken. We believe that with careful advance planning and intensive advertising, other public and private groups, including organizations within the black community, could be brought into the discussion on aging.

It is also our intention, if we are successful in encouraging senior citizens to take up full-time studies on campus, to enlist the services of fraternities, sororities, and other campus organizations in providing transportation.

Within the space and time limitations of this project, it was not possible to contact all of the organizations whose activities influence the lives of senior citizens, but we are optimistic regarding the future. For example, the Transportation Authority of Northern Kentucky has so far shown a high sense of civic responsibility and would probably be receptive to comment on such problems as the need for cheap excursion rates for senior citizens, the necessity of providing more suitable mounting devices on the entrances to buses, to cite two examples.

I. GUIDELINES AND REQUIREMENTS

Few difficulties were encountered in following the guidelines, given that the keeping of time sheets, expense forms, etc., are necessary evils.

J. OVERALL EVALUATION

The project appears to have been successful in bringing senior citizens, university personnel, politicians, and heads of social agencies into a better awareness and understanding of each other. We are particularly pleased by the element of friendship built up between ourselves and the participating senior citizens. At the same time, this places on us an obligation to continue the work we have begun. And it must be concluded that we have only begun. The forums have served an extremely useful purpose in bringing out problems which are usually hidden from those who are not in the retired group. Specifically, it is clear that information should be distributed not only to senior citizens but to social agencies, politicians, and other interested groups. It has been our experience that basic information on the location, function, and area of competence of bodies working in the field is not readily available.

It also seems clear that the public as a whole needs to be informed about the very real problems facing senior citizens: people do not appear insensitive to the problems, they are simply unaware they exist.

The concept of using humanities professors is a good one. As we are not, properly-speaking, professionals in the field, we perhaps avoid the danger of dominating the senior citizens: of telling them what their lives should be like. Perhaps the most important conclusion we have reached is that senior citizens do not wish to be singled out from society; they merely wish the opportunity to play a meaningful role within that society.

At the same time, we, as amateurs, need to do more research on the problems of aging if we are to help in solving any of the questions which have been raised. We have also been concerned about having the senior citizens believe that we have the power to implement suggestions. There is a very real danger that a program such as this will raise hopes which are impossible to fulfill at present.

Perhaps our single greatest problem has been in terms of the mechanics of the thing. The adjustment to the administrative side of the project was a painful one. We hope, however, that we have now learned the importance of rigor in the keeping of centrally located files, of keeping abreast of the mundane, routine flow of things.